

## Chapter 1: Such Odd Behavior At Home

### Entry 1: Such Odd Behavior At Home

*December 13th, 1918*

*I write this from the train to Massachusetts. "I've graduated," he said. "You ought to come and celebrate with me, cousin," he said. "At least see your poor old mother for Christmas instead of sitting around with your rats," he said. And why, oh why, did I say yes? I don't want to celebrate anything with this man. He shouldn't be celebrating anything on his own, either, the blackguard! And I don't even want to go home.*

*He's in the train car with me now. I don't want to talk to him. I'm going to try to sleep the whole way. Maybe then I'll get over my cold before anyone invites me to any skating parties!*

*I don't often get invited to skating parties, in fact, I don't think I ever have been. But it would be rotten luck if someone invited me and I was sick and couldn't go. Maybe I would just go anyway, it's just a cold. Of course, I don't know how to skate, but I could learn.*

*Well, I think Fred wants to talk to me, so I'll go to sleep now if I can. I may not write at home. Not much happens at home.*

*-WpH*

*"Wakey wakey."*

Someone was shaking him. Wilson squirmed and writhed and struck out limply with the back of his hand.

“Such a fuss,” Fred tutted. “We’re at our station, old boy. I suppose you’d rather I let you stay on and wake up in Canada.”

Wilson made an inarticulate noise, his voice box not yet being awake. The train car was warm and stuffy- quite conducive to napping, as was the puddle of sunlight he was sitting in. Not nearly as conducive to getting up, grabbing heavy luggage and going out into the cold.

“What’s that? ‘Yes, Freddie, I want to run off and become a lumberjack.’ An odd decision, but I’ll support you.”

Fred was more interested in being annoying than in being witty. He was right, though, unfortunately. Wilson couldn’t just stay on the train.

Wilson got up, wriggled into his topcoat, and started wrestling with his suitcase. It was almost as big as he was, and almost too heavy to lift. Had it been this big and heavy when he’d put it on the train?

Fred picked up his own bag- it was tiny. Right- he had a home wardrobe and a school wardrobe. Wilson did not have two separate sets of clothes- his parents were rather well off too but not like the Wheelers, not well off enough to buy him a second wardrobe just to keep him from handling a suitcase. Although it had been Wilson’s decision to pack textbooks. Perhaps that had been the wrong decision.

“There are people to do that for you,” Fred said offhandedly as they headed down the aisle with Wilson’s trunk bumping along behind him. “Not me, of course... I can hire someone?”

“How nice of you to offer to help when we’re already to the door.”

“Someone’s unpleasant when he’s been woken.”

Tight-lipped, Wilson did not reply.

They exited onto the platform and Wilson took a deep breath of fresh air. It was cold, even through his mask, and caught in his chest- which was still slightly congested, it seemed, the sleep hadn’t done the trick- and he coughed. A few passersby looked alarmed at the sound.

“Chilly, isn’t it? Right amount of snow for Christmas, though.” Fred popped his pipe into his mouth and proffered the box of tobacco. Fred had not worn a mask, even though the influenza virus was still in Boston and train stations were excellent places to catch germs.

Wilson scowled. “I told you I quit.”

“Of course you did, old boy, just like the last time you quit tobacco. And the time when you swore off coffee. And the time you renounced sweets.”

Wilson’s abandonment of his pipe was quite recent and the smell of Fred’s tobacco was highly tempting. Maybe-

No! He would not give Fred the satisfaction. “Get that stuff out of my face!” It was bad for his cough anyway, that was why he’d quit. Also, if he smoked, he’d have to take off his mask. And if Mother had any inkling that he’d been smoking she’d kill him.

“All right, all right,” Fred said, and he put the box away. “You were asleep quite a while, old bean, and it seems to have put you out of sorts. I think your lurid, maniacal all-nighters are catching up with you. I say, that’s your mater over there, isn’t it?” Fred’s tone changed sharply- still nonchalant, but falsely so. After two and a half decades of

acquaintance Wilson knew the difference. “Wills, she’s wearing black, you wouldn’t happen to know about that, would you?”

“She’s just being fashionable.” Wilson looked over. “Although the veil is an… interesting touch.”

Behind the gauzy veil, his mother’s face was pale and taut. She saw him, and she smiled and waved. It did not look like a real smile, though. Wilson adjusted and re-adjusted his grip on his suitcase.

“Oh- those are my parents,” said Fred. “Shall I be off, or shall I have a kiss for Aunt Wilhelmina first?”

Ah yes. Fred was meeting both his parents, because rich old Uncle Alvin, like Fred, had not chosen to go to war. Father had. Father wasn’t here, and Mother was in black.

“Go meet your parents,” Wilson said, more shortly than he’d intended.

“All right. I’ll see you soon.”

“Not too soon, I hope,” Wilson said, and Fred rolled his eyes as he left.

“Oh, it’s dreadful,” Mother said as Wilson approached. “It’s simply dreadful, Wills!”

“What is? What is it?” His voice quivered despite himself. “Was it the flu? Pneumonia? Is he alive still, or-”

“Oh, no, no, it’s nothing to do with your father,” Mother dismissed. “He’s fine.”

Wilson took a deep breath. “Ah…”

“Don’t look so relieved,” Mother insisted. “Two of your aunties, and Uncle Morris, and their poor children-“ She sniffled into a handkerchief. “It was that flu.”

Two aunts? And Uncle Morris? It couldn't be. He must be misunderstanding. "Are they dead?" he ventured.

Mother began sobbing. "Of course they're dead! Did you think they were on vacation? Don't you see that I'm in mourning?"

"Oh, I..." Dead? And he'd been asleep a moment ago. "So then..." He ought to have worn black. "When did..." He should have known about this. Had there been any mail he hadn't read? Sometimes he didn't read his mail because it wasn't important but... this was important... "Which aunties? Was it- was it Aunt Edna?" How could he have been peacefully sleeping not fifteen minutes ago if a big chunk of his family was dead?

Mother was still crying, in part because he had been so insensitive. He put his bags down to pat her shoulder. "Oh, it's..." He trailed off. It wasn't okay, her sisters and brother-in-law were dead. What in the world should he say?

"Shall I drive?" he asked lamely.

"No," she said, sniffing and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "No, don't drive, dear."

He'd forgotten how she never wanted him to drive. That was all right, at the moment he'd rather not drive...

"When did it happen?" he asked on the way to the car. The train station was as busy as it usually was around Christmas, and he was one of very few people in masks. That all didn't strike Wilson as terribly wise, but no one had consulted him about it.

"The first was three weeks ago."

Three weeks. All of them gone? "Why didn't you send a telegram? I could have..." What would he have done, exactly? Send flowers? To whom?

“You had your finals,” Mother said. “You didn’t need the stress.”

“Oh...” But this was quite stressful right now. “Oh, and how about Father?”

“What about him?”

“Have you heard anything? Is he getting better?”

“I know as much as you do,” she said distractedly.

“Oh... I see...”

They were at the car. Wilson hefted his trunk into the back. Heaving for breath, and well out of the thick of the crowds, he discarded his mask. The air was even colder without it. Recalling the earlier stares, he managed to suppress his threatening cough. No need to worry Mother.

“That’s hardly necessary by now, you know,” Mother said as he sat down next to her. “The mask, I mean.”

“But you’re telling me our relatives are dropping like flies!”

“Oh, that was weeks ago, it’s nearly all over now.”

‘Nearly’ wasn’t nearly enough for Wilson’s peace of mind, especially now.

“Does Fred know?” he asked as they were pulling out onto the road.

“Hm? Fred?”

“My cousin, Fred Wheeler?”

Mother looked nonplussed. “Wheeler?”

“Uncle Alvin has been paying for my school since I was about ten! You do know the Wheelers? Father’s sister and brother-in-law?”

“Oh, yes, the gamblers. Sweetie, why do you take their money? You’re an adult now and your father’s not here to strong-arm you into it.”

“But...” But no one had ever had to convince Wilson to take free money!

“Anyway, I don’t know whether or not your cousin knows. He’s not related to my side of the family.”

“He’ll have to know the party is off,” Wilson said, although as he said it he realized that was a rather insignificant problem compared with everything else.

“The party’s not off,” said Mother. “Besides, your cousin wasn’t invited.”

Wilson blinked and inclined his head in confusion. His chest cold must have spread to his ears somehow. “Pardon?”

“He wasn’t invited, the Wheelers are trash,” Mother said distractedly.

“Of course they are,” said Wilson, sarcastic despite knowing it wasn’t appropriate- it had sort of slipped out. His dry tone had gone over Mother’s head anyway, thankfully.

“But there’s still a party?”

“There is still a party,” she said quite clearly. “Why on Earth wouldn’t there be?” Her tone was indulgent.

“But...”

“It’s what they would have wanted,” Mother said.

Wilson sounded squeaky and incredulous to himself. “Is a party a good idea during a pandemic?”

“My doctor son!” she said, with a warm note of condescension. “No, no, the worst is over- it’s practically all gone now. It will be quite all right.”

Wilson said nothing for the rest of the ride home.

Once there, he took his suitcase out of the automobile. He had thought he was prepared for its weight but he wasn’t and he half-dropped it onto the ground.

“There’s a funeral tomorrow,” Mother said. And a party tonight... okay... “Did you bring any black?”

“No, I haven’t got anything in black, I wasn’t expecting a funeral,” Wilson said. “I’ll have to go buy something.”

“Father had a black suit,” said Mother, with the past tense, as if he’d already died, “you can alter it.”

“No! That’s his suit. I’ll buy my own,” Wilson insisted. “I mean, he’ll come back and need it again and it will be all hacked up- I can’t wear his clothes!” Father was a good foot taller than Wilson. His suit would be ruined entirely...

“Oh, my boy,” fussed Mother, and she took him into one of her pillowy embraces. She smelled of lavender, and in a moment he was a small boy again constantly being swept up by strange lavender-smelling adults, even though Mother was one of the few people who was shorter than he was.

It wasn’t a pleasant sort of nostalgia.

“Don’t go to war,” she said into his shoulder.

“No, Mother, I won’t,” he said dutifully.

“Don’t ever go to war.”

“I’ll never go to war, Mother.”

It was an honest promise. He couldn’t go to war regardless of what his or anyone else’s wishes may have been, he was undersized and neither the United States nor the United Kingdom would take him. No venturing into dangerous territory for Wilson.



Mother released him after what seemed an eternity and he picked up the trunk again. “Well, I’ll unpack and change,” he said, “and then I’ll have to buy a suit for tomorrow, I suppose. Oh, are the girls coming to the funeral?”

“Hmm?”

“My sisters? When are they coming in? Will they be in time to go?”

Mother blinked and inclined her head to one side. “None of the girls are coming for Christmas. They’re all much too busy this year. It’s just you and me, darling.”

Oh.

“Ah, how- how lovely,” Wilson stammered. “I’ll, uh- I’ll go upstairs.”

“Alright. You must be tired from the trip!”

“Yes.”

Wilson dragged the trunk up the stairs to his old room. There was a maid in there- a new one.

“Hello,” Wilson said politely. If only she’d been a male servant, he could have asked for a hand with his trunk.

“Er,” the maid said. “Good day.”

He managed to get blasted thing in a little farther, to a spot where people could go in and out and wouldn’t trip on it, and he sat down on the bed, sighing. He was out of breath from his exertions and had a faint twinge in his upper left chest when he gulped in air.

The maid fidgeted.

Hm. The girl looked completely nonplussed.

“No one told you I was coming?” he ventured.

“No, sir...”

“I suppose Mother must have forgotten to tell you.” This had happened last time he’d visited, too. Mother had a lot on her mind these days. “I’m home from graduate school. I’m Mrs. Higgsbury’s son,” he said. “This really is my room, you can ask her.”

“Yes, sir. Shall I go?”

“Well, if you’re finished and all,” he demurred. Yes, please, he thought. She seemed like a perfectly nice girl, but the presence of a stranger made the space feel electric and full.

“Yes, all right,” she said, and bobbed her head, and left.

Wilson sighed. He got up and opened his trunk. Inside were the clothes that he had jammed in that morning, jumping on top of them to make them fit- irritable, swearing under his breath and with no problems on his mind more pressing than the tight space in the trunk and the sticky all-over unpleasantness of his cold. It seemed like a million years ago.

Two of your aunts... Uncle Morris... their children... what did that mean? Some of his aunts had quite a lot of children. Which aunts? She hadn’t even told him which aunts were dead. Was this some kind of a horrible joke?

Uncle Morris, with his gingery beard and booming voice, who would clap Wilson on the back heartily enough to almost knock him over. A man like that, a robust man, he couldn’t die of flu. He’d survived the trenches!

But he wasn’t thinking rationally at all. Wilson had seen how the morgues looked in August... had he thought a family as large as his wouldn’t have any flu deaths?

He closed his eyes and put his hands over them to keep the light from filtering through his eyelids. He was sweating but did not have the energy to take off his coat.

He might as well not mention this cold to his mother. 'Cold' sounded too much like 'flu' to the nervous layperson. He could not have the flu- flu was swifter and much more pronounced, and would have been over by now one way or another- but still, best not to worry anyone.

Anyway- there was a question of suitable clothing.

Wilson wasn't terribly social and didn't own a great deal of fancy dress. How formal was this evening?

Ah. Right, he'd spilled a little HCl on his dinner jacket. Now he didn't have a dinner jacket. He had a rather nice business suit. That would have to do.

And nothing in black... and a funeral tomorrow.

Wilson liked bright colours and didn't buy dark clothing unless he had to. Now he had to. And he couldn't buy off the rack without having it altered at least a bit, he was too short. He ought to have been told about this. Why hadn't Mother sent a telegram?

Well, the problem wouldn't get fixed by just thinking about it. He'd better get to the shop.

He got back some hours later, having quickly ordered a made-to-measure suit that would supposedly be ready in the morning.

He had walked to town, since Mother didn't like him to use the car, and now he was tired and out of breath and wishing there was no party that evening. Of course he had already wished that for several other reasons.

It wouldn't take him long to get ready for the party. He could spend some time to himself first. Maybe he'd sit and read in the parlour, or play the piano, though his musical skills were wretched at best. He could probably still remember 'Chopsticks'...

The parlour was locked.

"Now, Wills, you don't need to go in there."

Wilson jumped. Mother was sitting in the corner, knitting. He had not seen her.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Don't play in the parlour, sweetie. It's being painted." It did smell funny through the door, though he hadn't placed the smell as paint. That smell was-

That smell was-

No, it couldn't be. An artefact of his cold producing unpleasant sensory impressions.

"It's locked," he said. "I can't go in anyway."

"Good," she said sweetly. "Don't."

"Fine," he grumbled.

Mother was slightly pale. Of course she was always pale, she was the genetic origin of the sickly pallor Wilson had seen in the mirror all his life. But she looked strained in addition. And why shouldn't she? She was grieving! He shouldn't be short with her.

"Listen," he said, "I'm sorry this happened. You know, my specialty is chemistry and pharmaceuticals, and if you need something to relax-"

"No, dear."

He blinked. "Are you sure? Because I brought a few of my supplies, and-"

“No.”

He never did understand why people didn't want to avail themselves of scientific help, but that was her choice and he wouldn't force things. “Well, if you ever just want to talk,” he said.

“I'll remember that.” Her needles clicked together with a rather final clack.

So the parlour was blocked off and there was no point in standing around watching Mother knit. She clearly did not want to talk.

That left the living room. The furniture had been moved around, as it often was while he was gone, but the basic items were the same- the plush red couch, the cherry wood coffee table, the thick rug. A nice spot for curling up with a book, or, like now, just sprawling on the couch and trying to regain one's equilibrium.

Or wondering about the smell from the parlour.

Four people had shown up. The table was set for ten. That might or might not have anything to do with the epidemic, which really was dying down- he recalled low attendance of Mother's parties that past summer as well.

Wilson twisted his napkin back and forth and gazed absently at the surface of the table. His mother was chatting animatedly with the guests about acquaintances he didn't know. The guests were Aunt Edna, Uncle John, Uncle Sean, and Great-Aunt Mary, and they were all rather old and quite unflappable. He was not sure they were aware there had been deaths in the family. The subject hadn't come up so far.

Uncle John leaned in to talk to him now, with foul, rotting breath. “So, eh, how are you doing in school, boy? Not getting up to too much trouble?” His voice quavered with age. “Not bothering your teachers?”

“No, no trouble from me, sir,” Wilson said, hearing timidity in his own voice. He cleared his throat and made an attempt to sound more confident. “I’ve been doing well, I think. I’ve started an experiment with rats and ionic solutions. You see, I think it’s possible to induce the rats to store electricity! How useful would that have been in the trenches? A living portable battery!”

“Typical little boy, teasing animals,” Uncle John said. “How about girls? Eh? Still afraid of them or starting to catch on now?”

It dawned on Wilson that Uncle John- who was becoming downright decrepit- had not gotten the memo that his nephew was now in graduate school.

“Girls have cooties, don’t they?” he said. “How old am I now? Ten?”

Uncle John wheezed a laugh and clapped Wilson on the back, which disturbed his congested chest and made him hack into his handkerchief.

“How is my favourite nephew?” This was Aunt Edna, peering at him with watery blue eyes. Wilson was her only nephew.

“Ugh, oh,” Wilson mumbled, discreetly folding his handkerchief, which he had had to spit into, which was terrible manners at the table but it had been spit or choke. “I’m doing great.”

“Have you found a nice young thing at school yet, Willy?”

“Oh, no, Aunt Edna,” he said, “I’m not going to get married. I have much too much to do! I don’t want to have someone fall madly in love with me only to languish at home

while I'm giving lectures and attending conferences and changing the world..." Of course, girls would begin to notice him when he started being famous, and might fall in love with him anyway, but hopefully they'd get over him.

"Your poor mother deserves grandchildren," said Aunt Edna.

"Mother already has grandchildren. My sisters have children," Wilson pointed out. "Besides, I don't like children, I like science." This all seemed very reasonable to him, but Aunt Edna suddenly looked very sad, and he flushed and wondered if he should have lied. But why should she care so much?

"Wilson Percival, you are growing up into an awfully selfish young man," she chided.

He didn't know how to respond. "Sorry about that..."

"And you haven't touched your food."

Wilson obediently took a bite of potatoes.

Aunt Edna shook her head and tutted and turned to talk to Priscilla.

Wilson put his fork down. He had not eaten much all day and really ought to get something down, but his stomach felt limp and listless and his taste buds were out of order- a state of affairs not aided in the slightest by the richness of the food or the distinctive smell of elderly relatives.

In addition to all that, there was another smell in the air, beginning to leak over from the parlour door. And now he was quite convinced he knew what it was. He had enough experience with the smell of decay to know for darn sure when he smelled it. Although why it was issuing from the parlour... that was another question.

A door opened. He assumed it was a servant at first and then he heard the reedy, affectedly-English cry- “Auntie Wilhelmina! Oh, I’m so sorry, you’re entertaining! Don’t mean to intrude! I was just going to drop in to take this rascal off for a pint, but if you lovely ladies happen to be using him already...”

Wilson very nearly swore right in front of two elderly aunts and his mother. “Fred, get out.”

“Look at him,” Fred said, towering over Wilson. “He’s obstreperous. Needs a drink.” He bodily hauled Wilson to his feet. “No one objects, then?”

“I object, I object,” Wilson cried shrilly, but somehow he was already out in the hall, leaving a few goggling old people behind him, and now he was in the study.

Fred closed the door behind them.

“What do you want?” Wilson snapped. “You know, you were not invited!”

“All right, now, stop this,” Fred said in a low voice. “You didn’t want to go to war any more than I did. If you hadn’t been rejected, you’d have found some other way out of it. Hell, you’d probably have asked my dad to buy you out too, so you are going to cut out this shame-the-defector act right this very second.”

Wilson folded his arms tightly over his chest and plopped down in Father’s reading chair. His legs didn’t quite reach the ground.

“Would you like to curse at me a little, Wills? Call me a despicable blackguard or a right bugger or something, would that help?”

Fred loomed over him, hands on hips. His bushy ginger eyebrows, sharp grey eyes, slender hooked nose and full moustache had been up there in that hovering-cousin space above his head for as long as Wilson could remember- although there must have been a



time before the moustache. Fred hadn't had a moustache when they were children, he couldn't have.

The study was full of Father's things. They were all dusty. No one had been in here since he'd left, not even to clean. He'd been gone quite a while.

Wilson's lip trembled.

He blinked. He hadn't been expecting that to happen.

He bent his head and pulled out his handkerchief. The unexpected misery was not going away, it was making a lump in his throat. He shouldn't be so astounded with himself, people did tend to be sad when their relatives died.

Fred stood there without speaking, close enough that Wilson could hear him breathing. He seemed not to know what to do.

"No one's told you, have they?" Wilson said finally. He turned away and dusted Father's globe with his sleeve. He didn't know what the new maid was intended to do and which rooms in the house she was assigned to, but maybe he would ask her to clean in here. He could tip her if needed. Why, Father could be well enough to come home any day, and have no study to recuperate in. This place was a mess!

"No. Told me what?"

"There've been some deaths in my mother's side of the family... you wouldn't know. I hardly know. No one is saying anything about it!" And despite himself, knowing he sounded petulant, he blurted- "I almost wish I'd stayed home."

Fred, to his eternal credit, did not say anything asinine such as 'This is your home!'

Instead he said: "Would you like to spend the night with me?"

“Oh. No. Thank you. I can’t,” Wilson said. He didn’t think now was a good time to leave his mother alone, even if Fred’s house was large, warm in winter and full of really good alcohol. “Thank you, though. That’s good of you to offer. I’ll be fine.”

Fred nodded.

“Um.” Wilson glanced at the door to be sure no one was there to hear. “The war’s over now, so... perhaps...”

“I’ll consider the olive branch extended.”

Wilson nodded.

Fred watched him a moment. “You know, your old dad wanted to be in. He didn’t have to go, you know. He’s married and getting up in years- and we would have kept him out of it anyway, if he’d asked.”

“Maybe he was trying to get away from Mother,” Wilson joked, but it was an awful joke and he shouldn’t have made it. He cleared his throat and looked down, swinging one foot back and forth. His father’s chair was so high! Sometimes Wilson felt as if he had quite failed to grow up. He wasn’t going to get any taller- this was as good as it got.

“Feel free to pop over if *you* want to get away from your mother,” said Fred.

“Nah. No, I’m fine. I get enough of your company at school!” He laughed. It was a thin, awful sound, perhaps worse than if he’d given in and sobbed.

“I dare say I’ve had enough of you to last me a lifetime as well,” said Fred, “but the offer stands.”

If only he’d accepted!

Uncle Alvin was loud and boisterous and probably would have kept him up half the night, and he would have been up the other half berating himself for leaving his mother alone at a time like this, but at least Fred's house didn't smell like death.

Wilson blinked up at the moonlight patterns on his ceiling. He rolled onto his side.

How many cousins had died? Had it been as horrible as some of the cases in the morgue? Had it been an entire family, Uncle Morris and his wife and their five children? Who had found them? Had they watched each other die? What was that smell?

He rolled onto his other side, coughing weakly into his pillow. Why was Mother throwing a party the day before a funeral? How was Father doing in the hospital? What was that smell?

Ought Wilson to really become a doctor and treat people with flu and do a useful duty to society instead of rebelling the minute he had the degree like he'd planned? No! Nonsense, all the real society-changing discoveries came from the laboratory, not the clinic. The medical profession needed new treatments and new research, not one more compassionate soul rushing around telling nurses to make patients comfortable and giving bad news to families!

The elderly aunts had shaken his reserve- that was all. At least they had only been his American aunts. Father's family was terrifying.

He rolled onto his back, touching his forehead and finding cold sweat there. Gross. How long was this cold going to stick around for? It had been three weeks now of illness, though only mild illness- at times he would think he was recovered, only to find he still had a cough. He almost wished he would get really sick and have it over with so he could get better. Almost. He hated full-blown colds.

No, really. What was that smell?

Wilson sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He had slept too much during the day and was too uncomfortable, this was a lost cause. And if he couldn't sleep, he was going to find out what was rotting in the house.

He put on his slippers. Wilson was careful with his clothing budget, shaving off as much as he reasonably could to spend on laboratory equipment, but he never ever skimped on slippers. He was glad he hadn't, the floor was cold.

He padded downstairs. The last time he'd snuck around in his own house after dark, it had been to creep into the backyard and dig for worms. He had been about eight or nine then. He was surprised that he still remembered it.

The smell was getting stronger. He followed it across the floor, noiseless in his plush slippers.

He was approaching the parlour door...

"Get away from that door."

Wilson rounded on his heel, gasping so hard that no sound came out. Mother was sitting in the corner.

"But... you..." She was knitting by candlelight. "It's so late!"

"Yes! It's much too late for a boy to be up." She tutted and shook her head.

"But..."

"Get away from the door."

He backed up. *This is my house too*, he might say, or *I've breathed in things a lot worse than paint in my laboratory, it'll be fine* or *Why aren't you in bed?*

None of that seemed right, though.

“Mother,” he said, with some hesitation, and she cut him off from saying anything further.

“Wilson Percival, you go back to bed this instant!”

He really should just go upstairs. Why, objectively, the chances of him being of any use here were very low. And he was a rational man, and could see that.

His conscience pointed out that his mother had suffered a loss and now was acting oddly, and he couldn’t just leave her to knit all alone at midnight. Why, if he ignored her, he was no better than he would have been if he’d just gone to Fred’s.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Why, of course I am, darling. What a sweet boy. Off to bed, now.”

He glanced at the locked parlour door.

“It’s being *painted*,” she insisted. “Goodness, curiosity killed the cat, you know.”

“Okay.” He backed up. “You know, I brought some barbitone with me. They don’t keep track of it at school very well-”

“My word! Why do you want to see what’s in there so badly?” The whites were visible all around her eyes. “Don’t you dare drug your mother! Go up to bed!”

“I wasn’t going to drug you! It’s entirely safe. It’s what’s in Veronal. And it’s nothing to do with trying to get in there! I was just offering a little bit of scientific help in case you-“

“I am perfectly fine!”

It seemed that Wilson was not helping at all. “All right. Good night, Mother...”

“Good night, dear.”

She bent over her knitting. He went back upstairs.

Chapter 2: A Death In The Family **Notes: This chapter contains discussion and description of dead bodies.**

*December 14th, 1918*

*Quite early morning*

*Back home. Can't sleep. My mother is acting... unusual. I don't want to write it all down now, I feel so drained all of a sudden.*

*Maybe I shouldn't write it down at all. I'm sure it won't have much relevance to my eventual biographers.*

*-WpH*

Maybe Mother turned up her nose at a little scientific sleep aid, but Wilson did not. As a result he woke up rather later than he had intended, but still had ample time to pick up his suit, drink his coffee, dress for the funeral and sit stiffly in the living room waiting for Mother to be ready to leave.

He still smelled decay.

The most likely cause was that some small animal had found its way into the blocked-off parlour and died. He'd seen how good little animals were at getting into or out of places they ought not.

Of course in that case someone ought to go in there and fish out the corpse, and that someone ought to be him, and if he suggested it Mother would sweetly bite his head off. But there was a back door into the parlour that wouldn't be guarded. Perhaps that would

be a job for after he was out of his new suit. He could just do it quietly and not let Mother know and then the house would stop reeking.

Later, of course. He had a funeral to attend first.

The body in the coffin was of Edith Kelly. She was no direct relation to Uncle Morris. She was only tenuously related to Wilson for that matter- and probably only related by marriage.

She had been twenty-one.

Wilson had seen dead bodies before. Loads of them. He'd dissected one or two of them. Many of the corpses passing his way had looked much, much worse than poor Edith. She had been made up skillfully by the undertaker. She wasn't damaged, bloody, gangrenous, cyanotic or anything.

He had not, however, seen anyone he knew dead before. When Grampa had died, Mother had deemed Wilson too young to go to the funeral- even though he had been eighteen then and had already started his summer job at the morgue.

There was nothing outwardly untoward about Edith's appearance except that she wasn't alive. But she'd been alive that summer. He had given her a ribbon for her birthday- knowing her well enough that a gift was required, but not well enough to give her anything more personal- and she had laughed and thanked him and he had stood there like a lump because she was really sort of attractive.

He couldn't think about being attracted to her! She was engaged! And dead!

She couldn't be dead. She was a nice girl. And what about her fiancé? Her fiancé must be feeling- he couldn't imagine. Where was poor Tony? Wilson didn't see him anywhere. *He* was alive, wasn't he?

Half the mourners were wearing masks.

Wilson expected to cry during the funeral at some point and braced himself for it, but he just sort of sat there feeling confused and tired the whole time. He had taken a little medicine for his cough and unfortunately it had a sedative effect. All around him, everyone else was crying. Eventually Wilson bit the inside of his cheek to make his eyes water and then hid behind his handkerchief. It seemed more polite.

Afterwards, everyone gathered around and spoke in low tones about the deceased. Wilson quickly noticed that they were looking at him oddly, as if they didn't think he ought to be there. Right, because he shouldn't be there, really. He had had only the barest acquaintanceship with poor Edith. He didn't even know most of the people here.

He drifted over to the edge of the room. His mother was in conversation with Aunt Judith. Mother looked quite happy and at ease.

Aunt Judith was as she had looked last summer and as she had looked when Wilson was still in knee pants- a solid woman with a black bun atop her head and the facial expression of a military general.

She had seen him. He drew closer with an acknowledging nod.

"My son is here," Mother said, unnecessarily.

Wilson tried not to fidget with his water glass and failed. "How do you do, Aunt Judith?"

She looked him over, not replying at once. Then: "Why didn't you enlist?"



He rolled the empty water glass between his palms, swallowing hard.

“He’s staying with me, Judy,” said Mother. “Such a good son.” No one paid her any mind.

It was sorely tempting to lie- say he’d been exempted because he was in medical school, perhaps- but he could not lie to that implacable face. “I was a touch underweight,” he said. “According to the US army, anyway. It was nothing to do with conscientious objection! Nothing at all!”

“What about your father’s people?” By which she meant the whole of the United Kingdom. “They wouldn’t take you?”

“Too short.” Yes, Wilson had been too small for not one, but *two* armies! The joys of dual citizenship.

Judith looked him over. “Do you know your cousin Jerome?”

“Uh...” There was never any point in lying to Aunt Judith. “No.” The thing was, a great deal of Mother’s relatives were or had once been Catholic, and so there were a lot of them... “

He’s your age. Your coloring, too. He also could not join the army,” she said, “because he was underweight. Shortly after he tried to enlist, he fell ill and was found to have tuberculosis.”

“Oh, how awful!” he cried. “Tell him I wish him well, please.”

Aunt Judith nodded as if satisfied and turned back to Mother. Well, alright. When Aunt Judith was done talking to you, she was done talking to you.

News like that, and poor Edith’s funeral to begin with- reminders of how awful the world was and how much it needed science- always made him eager to get back to school

and work, but he wasn't due back until after New Year's. On a personal, sort of cowardly level, Aunt Judith's story reminded him of some interesting things he'd read about the life-sustaining effects of building statues and filling them with meat. Maybe one day he'd try it. Not now, of course, there was no reason to think his own young life was in danger.

Wilson cleared his throat. He was beginning to feel that he had to cough- the medicine must have worn off- and he couldn't cough in the middle of a bunch of people who were mourning a girl taken from them by the Spanish Flu. He slipped through the doorway.

Now he was standing in the graveyard. He coughed until he was breathless- holding it in had made things worse. When the little dots behind his eyes had gone away, he saw that the graveyard was brilliantly lit by the sun, the snow white and blinding.

He had been here as a boy, too, and with his breath fogging the air in front of him- a visible reminder that he was alive, and above the earth, while plodding over the remains of those who were neither- he made his way to each of the headstones he was accustomed to visiting. Families had stood here and cried, uncountable numbers of them, but there were no traces of the mourners past but for a few occasional dead flowers and the odd epitaph: *Devoted husband* or *Loving mother*. Which meant a sorrowful wife or children somewhere.

A breeze whispered across his body. He shivered and shoved his hands deep into his pockets, interrupted from his thoughts by his living body reminding him that it felt the cold. Oh boy, did it ever.

A movement in the distance caught his eye. A plodding silhouette stooped over a cane.

“Mr. Thornton!” he cried.

That venerable man raised his head. “Well, well,” he chuckled. “If it isn’t little Higgsbury, back from the war.”

“Well, actually, I didn’t exactly-“ here he noticed that the old fellow was coming towards him, but slowly on account of his limp, so Wilson hurried over to meet him- “-I didn’t exactly go. I wasn’t what they wanted, you see.”

“Oh, now, who wouldn’t want you? A sharp boy like you? Inquisitive boy like you? Level-headed boy like you?”

Wilson could not but squirm and preen under this onslaught of praise.

“And what are you doing back here?” Mr. Thornton watched with his glass eye.

“Visiting the family for Christmas. I’ll be leaving right after Christmas to make a visit to Father. He’s still in the hospital in London.” This last sort of tumbled out.

“Ah, I see. And are you still working in the morgue there?”

“No,” Wilson admitted. Mr. Thornton showed an inclination to wander between the graves. Wilson offered his arm.

“Don’t mind if I do.” He leaned rather heavily on Wilson’s arm and they made the walk together. He smelled awful. “Now, why aren’t you in the morgue?”

“Oh, you see, I’m doing my graduate studies now, and summers I do my own personal research! Except for this past summer, of course, when the hospital was short-staffed...”

“Ah, now. And what sort of research are you doing? It would be a shame to lose you from our ranks. Another bright boy led stray by the glitter of war.”

Wilson was not under any sort of impression that war glittered. “Oh, I’m researching all sorts of things,” he said.

“Hmm, hmm, yes,” Mr. Thornton said. “We’ve expanded quite a lot since you were last here, my boy.” He gestured with his cane to the rows of headstones. “Nasty bit of flu, I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“My cousin once or twice removed is in there,” Wilson volunteered. “And possibly an uncle... or two, as far as I know...”

“Ah... congratulations.”

Congratulations? That did not seem appropriate in the slightest. Mr. Thornton was quite old, perhaps Wilson would just change the subject a bit. “Have you collected any new specimens?”

“Oh, yes, yes, more than a few.”

“Is Mr. Johnson still hard at work, then?”

“Yes, and how grateful I am.”

Perhaps Wilson ought to ask about the man’s prices. He could really use an anatomical model or two for study, and Mr. Johnson’s house wasn’t far from town, Wilson could maybe walk there if he made a day of it. Or just bum a ride from Fred. Anyway, a skeleton would be just the thing for his lab.

“Wilson! What are you doing?”

He turned. Mother was tearing across the yard towards him.

“The female is angry,” Mr. Thornton said languidly.

Before Wilson could react Mother had grabbed his wrist. "Get back inside!" she hissed. "You get away from these poor people! What have you done?" She looked at his hand. She was looking for dirt. She thought he'd been digging!

He tore his arm out of her grasp. "I did that *once* when I was *ten*!" he snapped. "Look, I don't even have a shovel! For crying out loud, the ground is frozen!"

"Don't you talk back to me!"

Mr. Thornton watched them with clear amusement.

Wilson's ears burned. "I only came out here for some fresh air," he said.

Mother harrumphed. "We're leaving," she said.

"All right." He wasn't sad to go. It was nice to see Mr. Thornton again, but he was feeling the cold something awful.

The rest of the day was spent ignoring the smell, reading in the living room in front of the fire, and watching Mother wander to and fro throughout the house with no apparent purpose that he could ascertain. It might have been inappropriate given the day's activities- regardless of how little he knew the deceased- but he had to admit he felt a certain quiet contentment. It was nice to have a rest, and it was nice to reacquaint himself with some of the old books that had been left in his room. Unfortunately, it turned out that some of the books he had liked as a boy had been awful. He remembered being quite enchanted with some of the worst ones, too. No accounting for the taste of children, he supposed.

When night fell, he said: "I think I'll go to bed now, Mother."

“Good night, darling.” Before he could realize what was coming and perhaps dodge, she had kissed him on the forehead. Her lips were cool and distraught and he nearly flinched.

“Why, you’re warm,” she fretted.

“I’ve been by the fire,” he said.

“You have a chill. I can tell. Wrap up warm and go to bed.”

“Yes, Mother.”

He set his timer to go off in three hours and lay down for a short rest.

When the timer went off, he got up, dressed warmly- he did not plan to be outside long, but one never knew when a simple rodent-disposal mission might end in complications- and slipped downstairs, going softly in his socks, with his shoes held in one hand.

He stepped outside. Oh, but it was cold! He held his handkerchief over his mouth while he caught his breath.

Okay, now, just around the corner ought to be the door into the parlour.

He stepped forth and was greeted with a deep, low growl.

Wilson darted back around the corner. He peeped around the wall. There was a large dog lying on the doorstep. It was tied to the door handle.

“She didn’t,” Wilson said to himself under his breath, but she had. His heart sped along in his chest and presented him with unhappy, lurid visions of his throat torn open by fangs, his life’s blood making a huge red pit in the snow. Just like something out of one of those cheap magazine stories.

Now, that was dramatic! How big even was the animal?

He took another look at the dog. The dog was definitely big enough to kill him.

It gazed back at him, showing no inclination towards murder. Its tail thumped once, twice. It whimpered pleadingly.

Now, hold on! He knew that dog. More importantly, that dog knew him. That was Mrs. Fields' mastiff. Enormous, but as docile as a new-born lamb. A laugh bubbled up in his chest. He tamped it down and it got confused and turned into a cough- but was soon over.

"Reginald!" he whispered, stepping around the corner.

Reginald got to his feet with a series of lusty, excited pants. The air fogged white around his muzzle. Wilson squatted on the ground and dutifully received his helping of slobbery, stinky dog-love square in the face. "What a good boy! Sit, now."

Reginald sat, looking up at Wilson with eyes full of adoration. Wilson ruffled the fur on the back of the old fellow's neck, then extricated himself enough to open the door and escape inside.

Despite his long and intimate associations with this particular odour, he still gagged when he stepped through the door. The decay was quite strong. He began to scout with his lantern for a little rotting mouse or something of the like. He was so intent on finding this mysterious perished rodent that he nearly missed the long, wrapped-up figure lying on the table.

It was wrapped in linens and looked quite like a mummy. Wilson blinked down at it. Surely he was mistaken!

No matter how much he blinked, the thing stayed there on the table. He began undoing the wrappings. A tug revealed a human face with the flesh falling away- and a fresh wave of stench.

Wilson's eyes watered. He turned away, retching dryly a couple of times. The smell hit one differently when one was not steeled to enter a morgue but was instead in one's own parlour where a body shouldn't be. Where a body should never ever *ever* be. So who was this? A relative with a bizarre last wish? A mummy, purchased as curiosity? What was going *on*? He couldn't identify the face, but that meant nothing, most of it had sloughed away. Or caved in.

Caved in?

Wilson raised his lantern for a better look. That wasn't decay- that was a wound. A bullet hole.

The door was opening. Wilson recoiled, knowing he had seen something that he was meant not to see.

Mother stood in the doorway. Her voice was rough. "I told you not to go in here!"

"There's a dead body in our parlour!" He nearly screamed it.

"That's your cousin! He died of the flu! We're just holding him for a little while!"

Wilson's heart hammered. "Oh he died of the flu, did he?"

"Yes! Everyone's dying of the flu!"

"I wasn't aware the influenza learned to shoot bullets!"

Mother stopped short, her lip trembling. Oh, oh no, he'd upset her!

He'd upset her? He'd *upset* her? There was a murdered man in his house! "What is going on?" he demanded.



And then Mother began to cry.

Wilson ought to remain resolute, and demand answers until he got them! “Oh, don’t cry,” he said instead, rather pathetically. “Just let me know what happened. Can you tell me what happened?”

“He broke in,” she sobbed, “oh, I thought I was going to die! So I grabbed your- your father’s service pistol. It was sent home to me, you know- he was afraid with me l- living alone.”

“Why didn’t you call the police afterwards?”

“I was afraid. I was so afraid, darling.” And she sobbed into her lace-trimmed hanky.

Wilson looked down at the dead face. If he’d broken in intending to do some mischief, well, he deserved what he got. Poor Mother must have been so frightened!

She moaned. “Look at this horrible mess! I don’t- want to go- to prison- because someone broke in and terrified me-“

Wilson bit his lip. She was becoming quite blotchy and tear-stained.

“I don’t- know what- to do,” she hiccupped. “The ground is frozen and I couldn’t bury him.”

“I can...” He said it slowly, hardly believing the words were his own. “...take care of it...”

She looked up at him with eyes that glittered with tears. She and he had the same very dark blue eyes.

“You can do that?”

She didn’t sound surprised. She sounded... pleased.

This time Mother let him drive- refused to accompany him, in fact, although if she had wanted to he would have discouraged it. It was better, he thought, for her not to be present.

The night was frigid. Wilson shivered and sweated at the same time inside his topcoat. At least the cold, still air kept him from smelling the thing in the backseat. Alone, his mind chewed on the situation, turned it over, came up with odd, morbid, disloyal things:

Would a woman in terror during a break-in be able to hit her target squarely between the eyes? Especially if she'd never used a gun before?

Had Mother used a gun before?

His sisters weren't coming for Christmas. They were 'too busy', according to Mother. But what if they hadn't been invited?

What if only Wilson had been invited?

What if only Wilhelmina Higgsbury's youngest child- her least social child- her only son, who though small, was strong enough and well able to move a body- her only son, who had worked in a morgue for years- had been invited for Christmas?

This train of thought could lead to nothing good. He put it out of his mind.

Then another one came creeping in, this one starting off with:

Why had Mother taken the man's identification out of his pockets?

Wilson had voiced the worry that the man might have family who would be wondering where their loved one went, and hadn't they ought to know, or more selfishly

hadn't they better not turn up on the front door with the police, and then Mother had said-  
"Oh don't worry, I looked in his wallet, he's single. I burned everything after."

That was oddly collected of her, wasn't it? Intentional?

Oh, and the corpse's jaw was missing, there was that. Fell off, Mother claimed. Fell off, or removed by someone worried about dental identification?

But he had to stop thinking about it, he was here.

Mr. Johnson lived in a cosy little hut tucked into the base of a mountain. At least, Wilson thought he did. He'd been given the directions a while ago and had never actually visited the man at home- only seen him in the graveyard- but this seemed like the right place. Wilson pulled up outside and stopped the car engine.

And then he just sat there.

It was 2 AM. Needless to say, he did not have an appointment.

He tipped his head back against the headrest, looking up at the sky. He had the body. He had the car. It wasn't too late to turn around and go to the police... they might think he'd done it, at first, but the train ticket would prove otherwise. Mother, though...

The man was already dead- what did it even matter? It wasn't as if anything would make him less dead. Wilson could choose to inflict a great deal of stress and panic onto his poor mother who had already lost an unspecified amount of family members and might- might also lose her husband...

Or he could get rid of the body.

Wilson tapped the horn.

The door to the hut opened, becoming a bright square with Mr. Johnson silhouetted inside it. He was hefting a rifle. Wilson silently raised his hands palm outward in

surrender. His heart thumped and the world around seemed one layer removed. It did not bother him in the least that if he made the wrong move he might be shot, and it did not bother him that this did not bother him, though it did strike him as odd.

Mr. Johnson lowered the gun. “Why, if it isn’t little old Higgsbury. Come in, come in! Don’t stand out there in the cold.”

“It’s so late, though,” Wilson said stupidly.

“No one told you I do all my business at night? Well, I do. Come, come.”

“I’ve got a... a question for you.”

“Oh, you’re a customer!”

Wilson had put together a whole story on his way here but it was fast slipping away from him. He clutched it back. “Yes! Strangest thing. I was stopping by the hospital to visit a colleague, and they had this John Doe, no identification, unclaimed some time. Why, since it’s Christmas, and they know me there, they gave him to me for a specimen.”

“Well, congratulations! Let’s bring him in, then.” He came outside.

Wilson was momentarily quiet, having not expected Mr. Johnson to actually take the body- he had not known details of what the man did and thought he was only a contact for purchasing anatomical specimens, and might know where Wilson should go- but this was better, he supposed.

“Yes, let’s,” he said.

They brought the deceased into a little shed behind the house and put it on a table. Wilson looked around at the blood-slimes surfaces. The shed smelt like a slaughterhouse.

It was a body-processing hut.

He felt a sudden, horrible, powerful urge to laugh. This gave him a giddy gadfly air as he said: "Sorry about the late hour! I'm out late so often that I forget other people are asleep! You know how it is!"

"Oh, no trouble at all! I'll get to work on him first thing tomorrow." Mr. Johnson tipped back the corpse's head to study its face. "Might need to find you a new skull for him."

"Mm, yes, that one's not-" Wilson clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle the giggles. No! Not now! "-that head's not good for m- much anymore," he finished, and he staggered outside, snorting desperately.

*What's so funny?* he demanded of himself. *Nothing is funny! Stop it! STOPPIT!* He bent his head, succumbing to squeaky, crackling giggles that soon turned into a wet cough and then into dry heaves.

"Good night for a drink, eh?" said Mr. Johnson amicably behind him. To an outsider Wilson supposed he must look quite drunk.

"Yes, lovely," he mumbled. "I oughtta be getting home now."

"Want to come in and warm up a bit first? It won't bother the missus a bit, she sleeps right through these visits."

Wilson straightened up to his full- though meagre- height and dusted off his topcoat. "No, that's all right. I'm very busy." He managed to sound quite even, though inside he was recoiling in horror at the thought of entering the man's house. "Christmas break is only once a year!" he added lightly.

"Oh, sure, that it is. And you're only young once. Off with you, then. Be back in a week."

Wilson scrambled to the car. He nearly knocked over Mr. Johnson's mailbox on the way out.

Chapter 3 Note: \$10 in 1918 is equivalent to \$172 today.

*December 15th*

*Wow! What luck! The hospital donated me a specimen for my research. What a lucky and unforeseen thing. As the body was in an advanced state of decay, I dropped it off with a local fellow for skeletonization and articulation. Everything on the up and up, of course!*

*-WpH*

*December 16th*

*Have temperature of 100.1 and nothing to say to Mother. She paces endlessly. I can't get a wink of sleep. Have tried to console her, but she pretends nothing untoward happened- even got mad at me. Undeserved.*

*-WpH*

*December 17th*

*Why do I have so many books about trains? Who gave me these?*

*-WpH*

*December 18th to 20th*

*Nothing of note.*

*The Invisible Man still as entertaining a read as I remember, although the science of it is questionable.*

*-WpH*

*December 21st*

*Mother is still pacing and continually seems to forget I'm in the house, jumping and etc. when I enter room.*

*Now this is really absurd but I keep thinking about how when someone else frightened her like that she... yelled at him! And made him leave. I don't want to also be... yelled at. And made to... depart.*

*I'm sure it's nothing! Maybe I'll stay at Fred's tonight, he might be missing me.*

*-WpH*

*December 22nd*

*Lost \$10 in a game of cards. I knew that offer of Fred's wasn't on the up and up!*

*-WpH*

*December 23rd*

*Out of books. Drew five different studies of the neighbour's dog, Reginald. He was a convenient subject, since he's still tied to the pantry door for some reason. I call the series 'I Had Nothing Better To Do.'*

*-WpH*

*December 24th*

*Made to attend church. The candles were nice.*

*-WpH*

*December 25th*

*Received socks. Leaving tomorrow!!!!*

*Fred driving me to port, likely to gloat over the \$10.*

*-WpH*

Freedom! Freedom, in this case, meaning a week on an ocean liner for the time being. And he had a room with a porthole!

It would be his first time at sea without Fred- perhaps that was why Fred had wanted to drive him to the port. That meant no one to play shuffleboard with- as in, no one to force him to play shuffleboard. He might not leave his quarters throughout the trip!

Mother had not even seemed upset that he was leaving, even though chances were that she wouldn't see him again for another year or more. Perhaps she liked not to be around someone who knew her secret...

"So, how was your vacation, old boy?"

Wilson looked away from the snowy sidewalks that he had been viewing from the window. "Mm? My vacation! Ah..." How to reply?



His skeleton sat in the backseat, neatly packed into his trunk. Wilson had expected to have some sort of attack of conscience or even a spell of faintness when he saw it, but it just looked like any other skeleton and he had decided... well, he needed a specimen for study, and he had no idea where to dispose of it anyway, so...

But anyway, he could never tell Fred. The thought of telling Fred, in fact, gave him the qualms he should have had when he saw the skeleton.

"It was nice," he said finally. "Yes, a nice... uneventful vacation."

"Apart from a little matter of ten dollars, I suppose, eh?"

"Yes, apart from that. And, ah... yours?"

"Oh, I had a spiffing time. Taking your money, reacquainting myself with the loveliest women of New England, taking your money, seeing my old mum and dad, taking your money..."

"I'm surprised none of those women have called the police on you yet," Wilson said.

"Perish the thought, they love me."

"They love your money." This was part of what rankled so much about the \$10-Fred didn't need it. Not even a little.

"It's all the same to me," Fred said amiably. "Women are in my vicinity and they are expressing love of something, and that's all I need."

This was something Wilson had not personally experienced and he had nothing to say about it.

The ride felt long, but when Fred pulled up and stopped the engine, it felt as if it had taken no time at all.

Wilson got out of the car and started tugging at his trunk.

“Hold up, there,” said Fred.

“What?”

“I feel like a cad, taking your money that way,” said Fred. “After all, I encouraged you to join in the game, knowing I’d fleece you. So... here.”

He deposited a parcel into Wilson’s hands.

“This doesn’t look like my money,” he said, bemused.

“It has been transformed into a more pleasing shape. Open it.”

Wilson did so. Inside the parcel was a box, empty but for a piece of paper. “Thank you for your purchase, delivered to...” Wilson’s voice fell away. That was his address back at school, and this was a receipt for... This wasn’t possible! He must be mistaken.

“Merry Christmas,” Fred hummed.

“A typewriter costs more than ten dollars!”

“That it does. I hope that soothes your raw hide a bit.”

“But Fred-“ The receipt trembled in his hand. “I only got you a plug of tobacco.”

“It was very nice tobacco. Besides, we all know I’m rolling in it. For heaven’s sake, man, look at those pencil smudges on your hands. Unseemly. You need a real writing device.”

Wilson looked up at him. His throat felt full and achy. He couldn’t speak.

“Yes, yes, you’re grateful,” Fred harrumphed. “Look, I’m not going to move your trunk for you. You get it.”

Wilson looked back down at the receipt. “I don’t...”

“Mm?”

“I don’t deserve this.” It was not a sentiment he recalled having expressed before. He saw in his mind’s eye the human skeleton in his trunk.

“Rubbish. Just use it to cure polio or something of the sort.”

Right. The thing in the trunk would be used to help humanity, and all that... oh, Fred was talking about the typewriter.

Of course.

“I really don’t deserve it,” Wilson admitted. But now he was beginning to sound rather ungrateful... “Thank you, though!”

He could not look Fred in the eye. He certainly wasn’t going to refuse the gift, however.

This time there had been ample opportunity to let someone else deal with his trunk, but given its contents he insisted on moving it himself. Having reached his quarters he happily abandoned the heavy item now, leaving it in the middle of the room because he didn’t care to move it any further.

He sat on top of it. From here he could see out the porthole. They were still in port and all he could see was the side of the next ship, but it would be a nice view when they got out to sea.

He sighed and rolled his shoulders. They were achy from hauling that trunk around.

All in all, he’d hate to live the past few weeks over again, but they hadn’t turned out so badly in the end, had they? And soon he would get to see Father! He swung his legs back and forth. And after that, back to work, with a brand new typewriter. He had very nearly bought one for himself only last month, but had decided to stock up on some rare

chemicals instead and just keep using the typewriter in the library. A decision that had worked out rather well. Yes, the new year would be a good one.

Just as soon as he got rid of this stupid cough, of course. He could feel it coming now. He'd taken a little medicine before the drive to the port, but it must have worn off. He'd need another dose.

He raised his handkerchief to his mouth and hacked into it. When he brought it away, there was a red spot on it.

Wilson stared at the spot for a moment. It did not change. He tilted it back and forth. It remained what it was, a drop of blood. From his mouth? From his lungs, through his mouth. Why- why, that made perfect sense. Why hadn't he seen it before? Prolonged vague feelings of illness, slight fever, loss of appetite, sweats at night, the cough. And now the beginnings of haemoptysis. So obvious! Even Aunt Judith had hinted to him at what was wrong, and it had gone straight over his head. How silly of him!

It was a good job he didn't plan to be a clinical doctor- why, he couldn't even diagnose a simple case of pulmonary tuberculosis.

Not even when it was staring at him out of the mirror.

*December 26th*

*I got it because I hid that body for Mother instead of seeing justice served. Now I'm going to die.*

*That's stupid and unscientific. I'm going to die because I inhaled germs. Rotten luck on my part.*

*I'm not going to die!!!! I'm going to take an aspirin and go to bed and see the ships' nurse when I wake up and she'll tell me I've worried over nothing.*

*I'm certain of it.*

*-WpH*